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Author(s): Everett C. Hughes

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THE ECOLOGICAL ASPECT OF INSTITUTIONS

EVERETT C. HUGHES

McGill University

THE ONLY idea common to all usages of the term institution is that of some sort of establishment or relative permanence of a distinctly social sort. On this point even those agree who, like Allport, admit the reality of institutions only long enough to "find individuals to study who are behaving institutionally."¹ Some let this idea stand as a sufficient definition, thus allowing the simplest folkways and the most elaborate "culture-complexes" to fall under the category. Psychologists incline toward such inclusive usage as would make institutions merely the social aspect of the behavior which they describe. Sociologists are more likely to restrict usage of the term, by distinguishing institutions from simpler units of socially established behavior. Sumner, for instance, puts them over against the folkways and mores.²

Another idea fundamental to the study of human life, that of collective behavior, grows out of the fact that human beings so obviously behave in response to the behavior of each other that what the individual does can be understood only by using the collectivity as a point of reference. Institutions are sometimes defined by distinguishing them from such elementary forms of collective behavior as the crowd and the primary group, whose peculiar feature is social interaction not mediated by established forms.³

There is an order of social phenomena in which the feature of establishment and that of collective behavior meet in a particular way: namely, so that the very form taken by the collective behavior is something socially established. Phenomena of this order are called institutions in this paper.

¹ F. H. Allport, *Institutional Behavior*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1933, p. 24.

² W. G. Sumner, *The Folkways*. Boston, Ginn and Co., 1906, par. 63.

³ C. H. Cooley, *Social Organization*, N.Y., Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921, pp. 30 and 319, *et passim*. See also E. Faris, "The Primary Group: Essence and Accident," *Amer. Jour. of Sociol.*, 38, July, 1932, pp. 41-50. Simmel, in his *Soziologie*, pp. 14-15, complained that social science had paid attention only to "those societal phenomena in which the interaction had already been crystallized out of its bearers," and had neglected the more immediate, intimate and passing forms of interaction. That is, attention had been given only to the larger, more formal and institutional aspects of social life.

Only where human effort is formally integrated are there institutions in our sense. Such formal integration takes place with reference to some functionary or group of functionaries, acting in recognized social offices. It is in the character of an office not only that it cannot exist or be carried on without the appropriate recognition and responses of other people, but also that the person who fills it may be succeeded by another.

The permanence which is generally thought of as a cardinal feature of a social institution is closely involved with the fact that persons do succeed one another in offices, and that other people continue to behave with reference to these succeeding persons in certain ways which are established as social expectations. It is usual to attribute this relative permanence to the alleged filling of some elemental human want by the institution. It should, however, be obvious that an institution does not fill wants in their generic and eternal aspects, but in their particularly defined and culturally peculiar aspects. The survival of an institution, therefore, represents the persistence of particular definitions of wants and of corporate ways of satisfying them. The passing on of these wants to succeeding generations is another of the processes involved in the survival of institutions.

The persistence of an effective want, and of an institution, is subject to a great number of contingent factors. The study of institutions is as much a matter of discovering these contingencies as of discovering their roots in human nature. The contingencies arise out of the inevitable relations of social phenomena with other social phenomena and with phenomena that are not social at all. Indeed, one might say that the scientific study of institutions does not have to do with their essential nature, but merely puts institutions into some orderly and understood relations with other phenomena upon which they are contingent. One studies, in short, the conditions of their survival, for all of the attributes of institutions (save that collective nature which they share with less formal phenomena) are matters of their survival in relation to other social and non social phenomena.

The isolated tribal community may be thought of as a single corporate unit. So closely are the activities of its members integrated that tradition can quite easily and apparently does assign to each person his place in the corporate whole. In such a community the survival of any institution is subject to essentially the same contingencies as that of the community as a whole. These contingencies

are, in theory at least, quite simple. To quote from Radcliffe-Brown:

The continuity of a corporation such as the Australian horde is dependent upon the continuity of its estate. In the first place, there is continuity of possession of the territory. Secondly, there is a continuity which transcends the space of a human life by the fact that as the group loses some members by death it acquires new members by the birth of children and the initiation of boys into the status of men.⁴

The succession of persons to status and to office proceeds by the "natural processes of generation." One can, in such a case, work out in detail, as does Radcliffe-Brown in the paper just quoted from, a sort of geometry or mechanics of transmission of rights and status by which the form of the society is maintained, subject only to the contingencies which arise from its exploitation of the territory from which it lives and from acts of God.

There is, in effect, no competition of institutions within such a community. Competitive relationships can be studied in terms of the community as a whole rather than in terms of its parts. The communication and transportation, both of men and of goods, which are an unfailing characteristic of civilizations, complicate this picture. Institutions, in communities where there is mobility, survive subject to contingencies which arise out of mobility.

McKenzie, in an unpublished paper on "The Ecology of Institutions," develops the idea that with elaboration of our producing techniques and the machinery required for them, with the increase in the quantity and range of transportation and communication, the institutional structure of communities is increased in complexity. That is to say, institutions are increased in number, and more specialized as to function. They have likewise become discrete entities, each with its locus in space. Since participation in the life of the community becomes increasingly a matter of participating in some way in institutional activities, the institution becomes the crucial unit for study of the underlying competitive processes with which ecology is especially concerned.

In complicated civilized communities the survival of institutions cannot be significantly described in the simple terms of the succession of natural generations. One must turn to succession in space, the movements of people and the bearing of such movements on the corporate units through which collective wants are satisfied, remembering at the same time that these movements are related to

⁴ "Patrilinear and Matrilinear Succession," *Iowa Law Review*, 20, Jan., 1935, p. 289.

institutions both as cause and effect. Where mobility is great, the term institutional generation has little significance. Participation in institutional activity may become almost completely casual. While this may be more especially true of business institutions, even the more sacred ones are subject in some measure to contingencies arising from mobility.

One corollary of mobility and opportunist participation is that, in contrast to simpler and more homogeneous communities, most institutions have only a part of the community's population among their adherents. Each person, in turn, participates in some fashion in a complement of institutions corresponding to his peculiar wants and his status in the community. His complement of institutions will correspond at some points with that of other persons, but by no means at all points.

The features of modern institutions which we have been emphasizing amount to a sort of fiscal separateness, which may be seen in the fact that institutional units are established, survive for a longer or shorter time, and disappear while the community as a whole goes on. It is their fiscal separateness and the consequent precariousness of their existence that makes institutions, perforce, enterprises. The entrepreneur is one who undertakes to coördinate the activities of others; he makes decisions and meets contingencies. This function, although performed in a rudimentary way even in simple tribal communities, becomes a crucial feature of institutions in a society where the mores, whatever else they may do, do not foreordain that the individual shall stay put and remain within the framework of given corporate units throughout his life.⁵

Enterprise is ordinarily associated with business. That is probably because business consists, by definition, of those activities which are freest from traditional control. The lack of such control allows enterprise to operate freely, which is another way of saying that competition is unhampered. Park and Burgess have said of competition "that it tends to create an impersonal order in which each individual, being free to pursue his own profit, and, in a sense, compelled to do so, makes every other individual a means to that end."⁶ Even where

⁵ It is of interest, in this connection, that the entrepreneur and business enterprise were somewhat neglected by the "chess-game" classical economics, but have become the special interest of institutional economics. The works of Werner Sombart, for example, are above all devoted to the study of the forms of economic enterprise and to the types of entrepreneur characteristic of capitalism. See also Paul T. Homan, "Economics: The Institutional School," and Maurice Dobb, "Entrepreneur," in the *Ency. of Soc. Scs.*

⁶ *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, Chicago, 1921, p. 508.

profit, in the monetary sense, is not involved, the function of enterprise appears in an institution in the measure that it survives by the conscious mobilization of people, through their wants and sentiments, by some active agent.⁷

The point of all this is that in our society, free enterprise is, if not a quantitatively constant, at least an ever-present feature of our institutions. It is for this very reason that there is need of a method for study of the circumstances under which, given enterprise and given our mores, certain institutional forms survive.

It is at this point that it becomes appropriate to say that institutions in our world are not only separate enterprises, but are also spatially separate. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive in space, but have separate and observable seats or focal points of activity. The distribution of their adherents may be entwined with that of numerous other institutions. It is, indeed, precisely their seats of activity that meet the eye. The movements of people to and from them and their underlying connections with other institutions have, in each case, to be discovered. When discovered and related to similar data on other units, they furnish clues to the functional relations of institutions. Just as the institutional connections of the individual reveal the "complement" of institutional services and activities which make up his economy of life, or, if one likes, his standard of living, so the lines of interdependence between institutions reveal the complement of institutions which make up communities.

The question now arises whether and under what circumstances spatial relations reflect the competitive processes pertinent to the survival of institutions. Simmel, in a chapter devoted to the spatial aspect of social forms, notes that it is movement around great fixed centers or focal points (*Drehpunkte*) which distinguishes civilization from tribal life.⁸ In the latter, small closed groups wander as a whole, although actually within a small range. Civilization is characterized not only by the fixity of certain focal points (cities), but by a great range and freedom of movement. These centers take on an inter-tribal character, and institutions of control on a territorial basis grow up at the expense of kinship or other closed groups. Civilization may be said to begin where some aspect of life is reorganized

⁷ Recent studies made by Chas. S. Johnson and E. Franklin Frazier seem to show that the Negro family is much more likely to survive where ownership of property or the status of a profession give an incentive for keeping the family together. That is, not automatic operation of the mores, but disciplined enterprise keep the family going.

⁸ Georg Simmel, *Soziologie*, Leipzig, 1908, chap. IX.

with reference to some point external to the local tribal community; that is, with the rise of inter-tribal centers, of which shrines and trade centers are the prototypes.⁹

These centers are socially established as symbols which dominate the sentiments of people over a wide area and through long periods of time. They are also focal points of transportation, travel, and communication. They do not so much occupy space as integrate and dominate movement within it. This, it seems to me, is characteristic of our major institutions, as well as of cities. That is to say, our larger institutions are more open as to the space which they dominate, and yet more fixed as to seat, than perhaps those of any epoch.

Simmel, in this connection, suggests a fundamental distinction as to the manner in which social structures occupy space. Some, he says, are mutually exclusive in space; others occupy the same space.¹⁰ States, for example, collide in space; they maintain sovereignty over individuals irrespective of their clan, racial, religious or other affiliations. Max Weber says, in similar vein, that the state exists finally in the effective monopoly of the use of force in a given territory.¹¹

Other institutions share the feature of closed space. The racket, for instance, operates by using force to maintain a monopoly of some function within a territory. Both the state and the racket engage in armed conflict over territorial boundaries, as against other units of the same order. For such institutions, the maintenance of boundaries is crucial.

Most institutions cannot be bounded in any such mutually exclusive way. Their seats can be located, and their constituencies plotted with reference to them. But their space is, so to speak, open. Institutions which have a clientele, a group of people for whom they perform some specialized service, may draw from the same territory as

⁹ See articles on "Holy Places," "Caliphate," and "Papacy" in *Ency. of Soc. Scs.*; on "Mecca" and "Lhasa," in *Ency. Brit.*, 11th Ed. A significant feature of imperialistic expansion is just this reorientation of local life toward outside centers. Even within the Western world this process goes on in drawing the more provincial regions into the main currents of industrial life. In French Canada, for instance, the social changes brought about by the development of industry initiated by English-speaking people do not take the form of individual defection from French life to English life, but proceed by the integration of an increasing number of phases of life about institutions whose focal point is the city of Montreal. Newspapers, trade and labor organizations, fraternal orders, as well as business and industry, are a few of the institutions in terms of which this reorientation may be gauged.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 462.

¹¹ "Politik als Beruf," *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*, p. 397.

other institutions which perform a similar service for other people, or some other service for the same people.

Such institutions may compete for individual patronage; the persons who support them may be regarded somewhat as customers. "Customer" institutions tend to be located with reference to the probable movements of population, and also with reference to their competitors, in the struggle to be equally accessible to the people whose wants they exploit.

If two institutions draw upon the same people, either they are in competition, or else the services which they offer are somehow different. Even in the latter case they may compete in some measure, for people have but a limited amount of time, effort and money to expend. To survive, an institution must find a place in the standards of living of people, as well as in their sentiments. There is some reason to believe that, at this point, there is some competition even between the church and the motion picture house, and that spatial accessibility may play some part in the issue.

Moreover, there is a tendency for even open institutions to approach a monopoly over some aspect of behavior; this amounts to saying that they too tend to establish a territorial monopoly of a function. Marketing institutions, for instance, form cartels, and in so doing make of their services a sort of public utility within a closed territory.

Even the Protestant churches are coming to look upon the exclusive territorial parish as the ideal. It can be achieved only by standardizing religion, so that in a given area a church can be established which will so nearly satisfy all Protestants who live there that no competing church will grow up.

The Catholic church can, in a purely Catholic country, achieve this ideal, because no one wants any other kind of religious service. Religion becomes a public utility available to all through a monopoly. The parish can, in such a case, survive a good deal of mobility of population. Even so, there are class differences which make parishes differ from one another in style of preaching and details of parish organization and function. When cultural and language differences are introduced by succession, even the Catholic parish church finds a problem of survival and of parish boundaries on its hands.

Thus far we have been speaking of institutions which survive by "serving" a clientele to which they must be accessible. Such institu-

tions are especially subject to contingencies arising from spatial movement of population. Their spatial relations seem to be a function of movements which they do not themselves produce or control. Some institutions, on the contrary, seem to determine the nature of the communities in which they are situated. These McKenzie calls basic institutions. They may be, in general, fixed in place by the heavy capital goods which they require, as well as by some intricate set of relationships to a larger region, and even by tradition. Their specific and significant feature is, however, that they tend to attract a configuration of other institutions about them so that they create a community of a certain kind. About a great university, for example, there grows up a seat of learning; about a great industry there grows up, in like manner, a community bearing its peculiar stamp.

It is with reference to basic institutions, in this sense, that the ecological method of using spatial configurations as indices of functional relationships has been most intensively applied.¹² Usually the method has been applied to communities in which the basic institutions are of the most secular sort, namely, marketing institutions and those which produce for a market. Such institutions tend to occupy their space in the freest way and to be highly sensitive to changes in the methods of transportation and communication; yet they do create about themselves typical constellations of other institutions, from large to small. Some of them invariably dirty their own nests, and perhaps bring on their own undoing.

It may be that business institutions are the basic ones in most communities. If they are not so originally, they may become so. Certainly in a community such as Sainte Anne de Beaupré, the shrine takes on a certain business character, and the welfare of all other institutions, down to the last family, is affected by the number of pilgrims who come. Likewise, a small university town takes a business-like attitude toward its university.

Ecology has likewise dealt with the basic institutional forms which grow up at the frontiers of the western commercial and industrial world, such as the plantation, which exploits native labor to produce goods for the world market. While the plantation may be a political institution, as Thompson suggested, in a paper read before the Society last year, it is also the crucial form of business enterprise in reorientation of tribal life toward the larger world.

¹² See R. D. McKenzie, *The Metropolitan Community*, and various articles by the same author.

Of less commercial institutions, the Protestant churches have received most study by the ecological method. In this case, the recent work has been done by people interested in making the Protestant churches efficient enterprises. They tacitly admit that this is to be done by adapting the church to the community; they seem to entertain no thought that the church is a basic institution. Charles Booth anticipated them in suggesting the hypothesis that the churches of London seem to vary significantly in character from area to area without much regard for denomination. He maintained that the religious institutions which exploit the peculiar combination of sentimental orthodoxy and a hopeless bent to sinning of the London poor are the same in form no matter what the denomination they belong to or the doctrine they preach. All must resort to the same devices to survive. He also related religious, as well as other institutions, to the standard of living. Such a hypothesis, since it has to do with the church in its competitive or survival, rather than its spiritual aspect, implies the ecological point of view.¹³

Certain studies of the family, such as Frazier's work on the Negro family in Chicago, and Charles S. Johnson's work on rural Negro families, might be called ecological. They constitute studies of the conditions under which, in the given state of the mores, the family will survive as a coöperative enterprise.

And that, it seems to me, is precisely the ecological aspect of institutions. It disregards the social-psychological aspect of collective behavior. In the case of marketing and industrial institutions in a free world such as ours, it seems quite justifiable to do so, for the element of enterprise is fairly constant and the restraints of tradition minimal. Even the more sacred institutions are subject to the necessity of competing, in some measure, to survive. Every institution, as an ongoing affair, has a secular aspect. The more sacred may respond less quickly to changes in the surrounding world. If they respond at all, they are subject to some such treatment.

The ecological method does not and cannot deal with those institutions which are completely indifferent to spatial contingencies. One may well doubt whether there are such, although certain sectarian institutions may be relatively so.

¹³ Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People of London*, 3rd series, "Religious Influences," Vol. 7, "Summary." See also H. Paul Douglass, *Church Comity*, N.Y., 1929. Douglass recognizes that churches reflect the standards of living of people (p. 2); hence any movement of population which entails a change of standard of living in an area threatens the existing churches.

It has also paid no attention to spatially closed institutions, especially the state, although states are undoubtedly contingent in many ways upon the processes which ecology describes. The relation between political phenomena and ecological processes has not yet received the attention it deserves.

It might well be asked whether in some sort of planned society competitive processes might not be so rationally controlled that the survival of institutions would no longer be subject to the contingencies here discussed. Since planning seems to mean such coördination of enterprise with respect to given functions within a closed territory as would make public utilities of the institutions concerned, its success may depend upon a proper understanding of the competitive processes and relationships which set the limits within which such coördination may be accomplished.

DISCUSSION

ROBERT C. ANGELL

University of Michigan

THE IMPLICATIONS of a scientific paper are perhaps more important than its stated conclusions. Since, however, they are harder to be certain of, and in any event flow from one's interpretation of the author's analysis, I shall attempt to appraise the latter before I venture a few remarks about the former.

I conceive the main thesis of Dr. Hughes' paper to be that particular institutions (I use the word in his sense) are characterized, in our culture, by free enterprise, and that they therefore participate in a struggle for survival, the spatial aspects of which are sufficiently important to make analysis in ecological terms fruitful. He supports this thesis by pointing out: that institutions may be classified according as the space they dominate is closed or open; that secular institutions, though their space is open, can each be given a definite spatial locus, and their constituents plotted; that sacred institutions, like the secular but not in the same degree, tend to compete for position in space; and that "basic" institutions reverse the usual order of events by drawing their participants to them rather than being located where they can serve those participants. These propositions seem to me in the main sound, and the general fabric of theory into which they are woven will, therefore, form a helpful guide to those